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ABSTRACT

Many American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth are repeatedly exposed to opportunities to participate in self-destructive and illegal behaviors. This digest examines risk factors associated with four contexts: peers, family, school, and community. Recent research has shown that, relative to national averages, AI/AN youth have higher rates of illicit drug use, reckless behaviors involving motor vehicles, and suicide. There is also considerable anecdotal evidence of increasing gang activity among AI/AN students. Family factors impacting students' risk-taking behaviors and academic outcomes include presence or absence of strong traditional values; the legacy of the boarding school era, which disrupted intergenerational transmission of culture and child-rearing skills; family alienation from mainstream institutions; and high incidence of poverty and of households headed by young women. School conditions and racism may lead to student alienation and dropping out. Many reservation communities adversely affect AI/AN youth through high rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic and other violence, child neglect, poverty, substandard housing, and unemployment. Additionally, in poor communities, schools are poorer and less successful. Resiliency research has shown that individuals and organizations can protect children exposed to community and family distress. (Contains 21 references.) (SV)

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ERIC Digest

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Ardy SixKiller Clarke

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Social and Emotional Distress Among American Indian and Alaska Native Students: Research Findings

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ERIC Educational Resources Information Center
DIGEST

Many American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth are repeatedly exposed to opportunities to participate in self destructive and illegal behaviors. This Digest examines risk factors associated with the four contexts within which AI/AN students grow and develop: peer groups, families, schools, and communities.

Peer Groups and Risk-Taking Behaviors

A 2001 study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) reported the following rates of participation in a variety of high-risk behaviors among AI/AN youth aged 12 to 17 years in 1999-2000:[1]

- *Illicit drug use* was more than twice as high (22.2%) as the national average (9.7%).
- *Binge alcohol use* was higher (13.8%) than the national average (10.3%).
- *Heavy alcohol use* was higher (3.8%) than the national average (2.5%).
- *Driving under the influence of illicit drugs or alcohol in the past year* was slightly lower (10%) than the national average (11.2%).
- *Use of cigarettes* was more than twice as high (27.2%) as the national average (13.4%).
- *Getting into at least one serious fight at school or work in the past year* was higher (22.1%) than the national average (19.9%).
- *Taking part in at least one group-against-group fight in the past year* was higher (22.4%) than the national average (16.1%).
- *Carrying a handgun at least once in the past year* was about the same (3.3%) as the national average (3.2%).

As these figures demonstrate, illicit drug use among AI/AN youth continues to be far more common than among their non-Indian peers. Beauvais reported in 1996 that, although overall drug use decreased from its high levels of the 1970s, about 20% of Indian adolescents continued to be heavily involved with drugs—a proportion that had remained steady since 1980. Alcohol use varies considerably across reservations and tribes. Overall, however, alcohol use appears to be a less severe problem than illicit drug use, and while still a cause for concern, is not as severely out of sync with the national average as is the rate of drug use. However, aggregated data can disguise acute problems in some locations by balancing them with successes in others.

Data point to a pattern of reckless living among youth in Indian Country. Motor vehicle and other accidents are the leading cause of death among AI/AN persons aged 15-24, whose rate of death due to accidents is almost three times higher than the rate for the total U.S. population (USDHHS, 1999). Among youth attending Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools, there is lower-than-average usage of seatbelts, motorcycle helmets, and bicycle helmets (Shaughnessy, Branum, & Everett-Jones, 2001).

Data also indicate the presence of despair. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for AI/AN youth in the 15-24 age group; currently the suicide rate is 2.5 times higher for AI/AN people than the combined rate for all races in the United States (USDHHS, 1999). In the BIA study, 19% of AI/AN high school youth had seriously considered suicide during the preceding year. Although still a strong cause for concern, this statistic does represent an improvement over the 29% reported in the 1994 survey (Shaughnessy, Branum, & Everett-Jones, 2001). National studies show homicide and legal intervention are the third leading cause of death for Indian youth (ages 15-24); the homicide rate among American Indians is 1.2 times that of the general U.S. population (USDHHS, 1999).

While there is considerable anecdotal evidence of increasing gang activity among AI/AN students, no national studies provide reliable data about levels of participation. In a study based on a convenience sample of nearly 14,000 youth in 50 tribes located in 12 states, 15% of reservation American Indian youth reported some level of gang activity, with younger teens participating at higher levels than older teens (Children, Youth and Family Consortium, 1992). A more recent study conducted on the Navajo Reservation concluded there was wide variability among youth who identified themselves as gang members. Some gangs were simply street-corner groups while others had hardened. Sociodemographic conditions were a strong factor in creating a context for gang formation around a small number of antisocial individuals. The researchers concluded that "gang prevention is not simply, or even fundamentally, a law enforcement issue. It is a public health issue in the broadest sense" (Henderson, Kunitz, & Levy, 1999, p. 258).

While levels of risk-taking behaviors continue to be higher than the general population and a cause for serious concern, long-term trends in the BIA study of high school youth show some improvement, and as AI/AN youth mature, their participation in such behaviors tends to diminish (Shaughnessy, Branum, & Everett-Jones, 2001).

Family

Several studies have provided evidence that families with strong traditional values positively impact the academic success of AI/AN students (for a review, see Demmert, 2001). However, for many AI/AN families, the interruption in the intergenerational transmission of traditional culture imposed by the Indian boarding school era—which separated generations of American Indian children from their tribes and families—continues to have effects today. Many American Indian women missed out on role models for nurturing and child rearing (Ing, 1992). Further, some families continue to feel alienated from mainstream educational purposes and institutions, which reduces their involvement in their children's educations (Cummins, 1989). A final family factor affecting educational outcomes of AI/AN students is the high incidence of Indian households headed by women (45%), 42% of whom were younger than 20 when they had their first child (LaFromboise, Choney, James, & Running Wolf, 1995). These

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factors not only contribute to the incidence of poverty in AI/AN families but also increase the demands on female heads of households, who may lack time and resources for active involvement in the education of their children.

School

While there are no recent data about AI/AN drop-out rates, national studies from a decade ago indicated that Native student rates were higher than other groups in America (Hillabrant, Romano, Stang, & Charleston, 1991). It is important to look beyond the youth themselves and examine conditions in the schools they attend. Bowker (1993) reports that students who drop out cite several school-related problems: failure or inability to get along with teachers, dislike of school, inability to get along with other students, boredom, feelings of not belonging, and suspension. According to Caine and Caine (1997), students who are confronted with racist threats on a regular basis often lose a positive sense of cultural identity and begin a process of *downshifting*, which eventually leads to dropping out. Similarly, Irvine (1990) suggests that when there is a cultural incongruity between the school and the student, miscommunication and confrontation often occur among students, teachers, and families, resulting in hostility, alienation, and eventual dropping out.

Community

Many AI/AN youth live in communities that continue to experience long-term economic and social distress. High rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic abuse, child neglect, substandard housing, and lack of job opportunities are common conditions in Indian communities. Violence on Indian reservations is often regarded as the norm. The dimensions of this phenomenon are described in a recent Department of Justice study, *American Indians and Crime* (Greenfield & Smith, 1999), which reported that the rate of violence in Indian Country is well above that for all other ethnic groups and more than twice the national average.

Multiple studies have shown the adverse effects of chronic exposure to violence on a child's ability to learn (see Massey, 1998, for a concise review). Massey, reporting research by Prothrow-Stith and Quaday (1995), points out that

> Learning itself is an essential tool for violence prevention. Children who achieve in school and develop important reading, critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills are better able to cope with stressful and perhaps dangerous situations. Also, academic achievement enhances the development of a positive self-esteem and self-efficacy, both of which are necessary for children to experience emotional well-being and to achieve success. (p. 2)

Unemployment, which is often associated with high levels of crime and substance abuse, is high in Indian communities, ranging up to 85% on some reservations (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1999). Nearly a third (31.6%) of Indian people live below the poverty level, compared to 13.1% of the general population (USDHHS, 1999). Apple (1996) refers to situations of high unemployment and poverty as "a reality of crisis, an economy that increases the gap between rich and poor" (p. 71) and points out that in poor communities, schools are poorer and less able to motivate students and their parents.

Conclusions

Addressing root causes of conditions that put AI/AN students at risk is the best long-term solution to challenges facing youth and communities. However, even in communities where dangers remain pervasive and severe, measures can be taken to protect children exposed to community and family distress. Research on resiliency has shown the importance of individuals and organizations in providing protection and hope to young people, while helping them to "find the good path" and lead fulfilling lives (Benard, 1997; Bergstrom, Cleary, & Peacock, 2002). These protective individuals and organizations can be associated with any or all of the four domains just discussed—peer groups, families, schools, or communities.

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[1] The statistics cited here are means for the years 1999 and 2000 combined.

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